OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

Kandahar Ambush Patrols

by the Infantry Squad Leaders and a Mortarman, Company K, BLT 3/6, 26th MEU(SOC)

'The choice of non-commissioned officers is an object of the greatest importance: the order and discipline of a regiment depends so much upon their behavior, that too much care cannot be taken in preferring none to that trust but those who by their merit and good conduct are entitled to it.'

—*Baron von Steuben,* Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States, *1779*

The noncommissioned officers (NCOs) of Kilo Company, Battalion Landing Team, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines (BLT 3/6), 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (26th MEU(SOC)) fulfilled a dream. They led their Marines in combat missions, constructed a formidable defense, and acted as their forefathers had in every battle that the Marine Corps has proudly served. Of note, these fine and honorable men of the Fightin' 6th Marines performed their tasks exquisitely in the conduct of ambush patrols in support of Operations ENDURING and SWIFT FREEDOM. I am deeply proud of their efforts, discipline, and esprit de corps; hence, I will let them tell the story of their own superior performance. This is a conglomeration of all of the squad leaders' efforts combined into one very interesting story covering an average 24 hours of their ambush patrol. Their colloquialisms and tone are that of seasoned and professional NCOs, so please enjoy and learn from their experiences.

The night of 10 January 2002 appeared to be just another night in the defense that surrounded the Kandahar International Airport. Marines were in their fighting positions maintaining a watchful eye. Anti-Taliban Forces were conducting vehicle patrols in front of the lines, and C–130 and C–17 aircraft were flying in and out as normal. Everything seemed the same as it had been for the past 20-something days. Suddenly rounds were shot at a plane attempting to land on the runway. The question in everyone's mind was, "Is that friendly fire, or will we finally get a chance to shoot someone?"

To our gratification, and somewhat surprisingly, it was indeed enemy fire. The night sky immediately lit up with illumination from 81mm and 60mm mortars. The Marines on the line erupted in a mass of fire desperately trying to hit where they had last seen muzzle flashes. After about a 15-minute firefight all fires ceased, but everyone remained at "stand to" throughout the night—even without being told to do so. There was just too much adrenaline coursing through our veins.

The next morning vehicular patrols were sent out where the enemy of the previous night was seen. The patrols proved that someone needed to observe this area. These fields with irrigation ditches and multiple, microterrain avenues of approach provided great cover and concealment for any enemy to get close enough to fire without being accurately fired upon.

Mission

The event of this firefight, combined with intelligence reports of another planned attack on the airfield, dictated that something must be done. It was decided that only by placing several small ambush patrols in the area could we hope to catch these infiltrators before they hit the precious flow of cargo airplanes at the airport. The morning of 17 January, Kilo Company was given the order to implement ambush patrols within the northern sector of the airfield toward the city of Kandahar. These patrols were to be supported by the company headquarters element with fire support team (FiST) and the company's 60mm mortars outside of friendly lines in this previously mentioned and highly mined sector. These ambush patrols would last for 24 hours with occupation of the ambush site only conducted under the cover of darkness and lasting approximately 12 hours. The area of operations was split into thirds, and each platoon would rotate sending out three squad-sized patrols each day.

The company commander's mission statement was issued immediately to the platoon commanders and squad leaders.

> On order, establish squad reinforced-sized ambush sites across north/northwest of Kandahar International Airport in order to deny enemy the ability to infiltrate and influence airfield or perimeter defense operations by direct fire.
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> INTENT: Three independent ambush sites by each platoon on a twenty-four hour rotation supported by Company FiST and 60mm Mortar Section.
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> ENDSTATE: The enemy denied ability to infiltrate within direct fire range of BLT defenses to the north/northwest of the airfield; Killer Company established a buffer zone of protection for the BLT defense and airfield operations; and, all avenues of approach covered by fire and observation.

There were two key points stressed in the coordinating instructions: (1) This area was heavily

mined—red painted rocks meant mined area, and white painted rocks meant cleared area; (2) the rules of engagement were hostile act, hostile intent, all unidentified personnel must be challenged, and positive IFF (identification friend or foe) must be conducted. Both of these points became critical pieces of information for all of the patrols of our company.

The bottom line, as derived from the company commander's order and coordinating instructions, was that it was up to us—the squad leaders of this company—to conduct these patrols and ambushes all within the parameters of the mission statement and the commander's intent. This was our opportunity to honestly be the leaders and decision-makers at the most pointed tip of the spear for all of the Marine Corps. This was an honor and a privilege that we had trained for, worked hard for and, mostly, dreamed of all of our noncommissioned lives.

Rehearsals and Inspections

The remainder of that day was spent with the small unit leaders rehearsing with their squads. Immediate action drills were practiced ensuring that muscle memory was achieved in every possible situation. Load plans were debated, test loaded, streamlined and, finally, established—all based on mission essential needs. Gear preparation and inspections were then conducted. Enough chow and water for 1 day was issued to each of the Marines.

Throughout this time of preparation the squad leaders were brought together and issued maps and satellite imagery. It was truly amazing that we NCOs had access to and use of the P–3 in direct support of our 10- to 12-man squads providing us with accurate and up-to-date intelligence. We had never seen that before. We gathered around our intelligence products and noted that the map reconnaissance didn't look too promising. Our area of responsibility was like a pool table. There didn't appear to be any location with cover and concealment to establish one ambush site, much less three. Although given tentative ambush sites to occupy based on the map reconnaissance, we were given the latitude in the company order to shift these as necessary based on our own reconnaissance of the ground. The company headquarters, along with 1st Platoon and the 60mm mortars, was set to step off as soon as it started getting dark. From the issuance of the fragmentary order to the first step out of friendly lines, all Marines of the company were nonstop in either preparing 1st Platoon for its mission or preparing themselves to go. It was truly admirable to see the teamwork that was applied in a matter of a few short hours.

Conduct of the Ambush

Everyone set to go the first night pushed through friendly lines at 1000 Zulu (1000Z). The company command post (CP) would set up first, lay in the mortars, and all three ambushes would wait in their harbor sites until last light when they would move to release points and to their predetermined locations. It was then that we would set into our ambush sites. At approximately 1300Z there was a leaders' reconnaissance of every ambush site. It was here that azimuths were taken for center, left, and right for each site as well as the mil direction of fire. Grids were taken for each ambush site's medical evacuation landing zone (LZ) and casualty collection point using global positioning system (GPS). Fortunately, each and every squad leader of our company owns a civilian model mini-GPS. This was all relayed back to the company CP, and preplanned fires were made for illumination and high-explosive missions. The movement out to the ambush positions was difficult at best as the entire area was littered with red rocks and white rocks. There were some white rocks on top of red rocks and some red rocks on top of white rocks—now that had not been discussed in the order. Nonetheless, we carefully marked the position, took a 10-digit grid reading, and bypassed the possible mine/nonmine and marked our route with thrust points on our GPS.

By then it was dark and we headed back to the CP area noting likely escape and evasion routes all along the way. All that was left to do was get the squad and set them in. We moved up to each site with security taking the lead, assault in the middle with our machinegun and assault attachments, and support taking up the rear. We stopped in our objective rally points and established a small 360-degree perimeter for security. It was here that flank security, claymore team, and machineguns got up and went to work at their prospective duties. The flanks set in first, then machineguns set their guns up while two Marines wired in the claymore to center of the line. Next came the rest of the squad along with the attached assault team. They established a hot and cold position for their SMAWs (shoulder launched multipurpose assault weapons). The squad leader assigned teams sectors of fire, and team leaders assigned weapons systems priorities of fire. Our infrared (IR) strobe was set up to let friendly air patrols know exactly where we were. The last thing to be done was a radio check with the company forward to let them know we were set in. We then went about the task of getting as comfortable as possible for a long, cold night in the ambush.

Nothing really happened for the first few hours. The Marines showed excellent fire discipline. They were on edge, and there was a lot of activity from local farmers and civilians, but no one fired. About 2300Z things got "weird." We were compromised by friendly coalition patrols. At first it was just by them shining the spotlights from their vehicles at our positions. Then it got worse. One of their vehicles rolled right up on an ambush position, drove over the claymore, and just sat there. They even got out of the vehicle and asked us what we were doing there. Didn't anyone tell them we would be there?

It was at about 0030Z that the next thing happened. It had gotten really cold (20 degrees), and everyone was absolutely miserable. Suddenly an illumination mission went up behind us. It came from 81mm mortars as they were conducting a reregistration of the illumination. Everyone was initially uneasy because that illumination mission could only mean that there was enemy movement behind us that friendly lines couldn't identify. Things were tense until company called and said that Army mortars were just sinking their base plates. Glad someone told us.

Despite being extremely cold, the rest of the night went off without a hitch. We were frozen, but everyone was alive, unhurt, and all gear was accounted for. We had been instructed to pull out before first light and retrograde back. For the squad members the patrol mission was complete. Yet each squad leader had one more task.

The sun was fully up now. The next platoon arrived and as everyone else thawed out, the outgoing and oncoming squad leaders got together and did a leader's reconnaissance of the area of operations. The outgoing squad leader always wanted this to hurry up because he hadn't eaten or made a head call in over 14 hours. He would brief his relief on casualty evacuation sites and escape and evasion routes. It was up to the next guy to choose his exact site for the night. "Bundle up," the outgoing squad leader would say as he shouldered his pack. "It is going to be a cold one tonight!"

Lessons Learned

This mission was looked on as a complete success. Some would ask how can it be a success if you did not kill anything? This is understandable reasoning since there was no contact or even any enemy to report. To respond to that is as simple as asking another question. Was the airport attacked again during that time? No. You would have to conclude that the mission was, in fact, a success. We concluded that the many local civilians contracted by coalition forces working around and outside the airport were providing information to any resistance force. Then, this begs another question. If you were the enemy would you attempt to transit down only one of three mobility corridors knowing that there was a reinforced squad of Marines somewhere out there? Probably not, if you have any sense of survival.

There were invaluable lessons that were learned by small unit leaders and higher commanders alike. They are lessons that we will carry for the rest of our careers. The first lesson is about coordination between adjacent units. What would have happened if the enemy had forward observers out when the coalition patrol compromised the ambush site? What if the coalition patrol had not been as disciplined with their fire discipline? There must be better coordination between adjacent units. This is a responsibility of some higher headquarters that must be doublechecked at every level of command. Someone up the chain of command must possess the knowledge about all of the forces in a particular area of operations.

The long, cold night taught us the next important lesson. Be sure to pay attention to the debrief given by the outgoing squad leader who was at the site before you. If they say "bring *all* of your cold weather gear" or "check your IR strobe every half hour," listen to them. Having good, recent, human intelligence about your ambush area is as good as gold. It is your most valuable source of intelligence.

The next lesson involves the need for new issued equipment. This issue has already been addressed in this article but will be readdressed here. The personal GPSs that each squad leader had were instrumental in the accurate and timely passing of information. The exact grids for extract LZs, ambush site locations, and targets for preplanned, indirect fire could not have been gotten as quickly or accurately if it were not for these useful pieces of gear. The infantry squad leader needs one of these issued to him. It should not be up to him to buy one.

The last, and most important, lesson learned as a squad leader is to trust your Marines and subordinate leaders to do their jobs. There is a tendency when lives are at stake to not trust anyone else and to try to do everything yourself. You must fight this urge and have confidence in your Marines. After all, you trained them. It is important to note that every Marine's job is important on an ambush. You as a squad leader cannot hope to pull even one extra Marine's weight. Your Marines must understand the mission and their responsibilities as part of the mission. You must have trained them hard so they can be counted upon to do their jobs.

Success can be hard to define at times. All you can hope and pray to do is come back with all of your Marines and equipment, and learn something tactically and personally valuable from the experience. The Kilo Company squad leaders' ambushes put a check in all of these boxes and, therefore, we believe, achieved success.

Each and every time I read an after-action report that my Marines give me, my first inclination is to be a little uneasy about their forthright sincerity and my lack of positively communicating every little detail that I should to them. However, it is a great learning tool in my development as an officer, teacher/trainer, and a leader. Although I will never be able to change the "travel light, freeze at night" aspects of weather, speed, and fundamentals of the ambush, I can better prepare my Marines in many other things. Thankfully, we conducted numerous live fire ambushes during workups at Fort A.P. Hill where we could teach, cock, and recock the hammer of this beast called the deliberate ambush. That was easy. Now add the friction of the unknown in war–multiple coalition forces and "suspected friendly" anti-Taliban forces operating "somewhere" in the area. All of us know the basics, and we must train with our all to achieve mastery over them. Those lessons provided by my squad leaders are the nuances of our profession–those issues that are so critically important that we don't think about sometimes. They are the very issues that we must trust our subordinate leadership to deal with. Each and every one of these squad leaders were 2 to 3 kilometers from the company CP in heavily mined terrain, fully armed with all possible ordnance, a radio, a fragmentary order, rules of engagement and, mostly, my belief in them to do the right thing because they trained hard and were smart. It is a proud moment to see a Ranger-file of dirty, frozen Marines, all alive and accounted for, led by a fearless NCO as they reenter friendly lines. God bless the NCOs of the Marine Corps.

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